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ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare wrote several plays which depict Jews and Blacks in a very negative, stereotypical fashion. In "The Merchant of Venice," for example, Shakespeare chooses to depict Shylock as Jews were popularly conceived in his era--as cold-hearted usurers and crucifiers of Christ. This is racist doctrine at work, as Shylock is stripped of his psychological being, his dignity, and his wealth and is forced to accept the prevailing laws and religion. Shakespeare, in resorting to this form of writing, used cruel stereotypes for mercenary and artistic purposes and, as Shakespeare gave all of his characters life, it is not on the characters that readers should place moral judgment, but on the "bard" himself. Shakespeare paints a very vivid picture of Aaron, Caliban, Othello, and Shylock and then expects to stand aside and allow readers to rip at characters' throats because they are either a "dog Jew," a "black fiend," or "an old black ram." It is, however, Shakespeare himself who is passing moral judgment, through racial bias, on these characters, these people. Man has an obligation to his fellow man to think/reason carefully before he commits his hidden thoughts to paper, because he has the capacity to bring injury to a person or group, and to commit a grave injustice. Words, whether spoken or written, are powerful in their expression. Sadly, somewhere in his groping for material to construct his plays, Shakespeare failed to comprehend (or ignored the voices in his head), the power he would one day wield with his pen. He did not realize that he would become the most studied playwright in history. (Thirty-four notes are included and 39 references are attached.) (PRA)

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Shakespeare's Intent: A Discourse on Racism
By D. Alexander Holiday

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**I have much ado to know myself**

(I;i. 7)

The quote is from Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice, spoken by Antonio in a melancholy mood.[1] The line is appropriate for a discussion about William Shakespeare and more importantly a discourse on racism in several of the dramatist's plays. By discourse I refer to Paul A. Bové's article entitled, "Discourse," in which he provides a definition that will be central to this argument. Discourse, according to Bové, "aims to describe the surface linkages between power, knowledge, institutions, intellectual...knowledge about humans and their society...an expression of a person's 'mind' or 'psyche.'"[2] In other words, what can we know about William Shakespeare? For Bové, Foucault, Derrida and others, any discourse on literature becomes complicated since for them the author is "dead"[3] and should remain so, not to be taken into any discussion relating to the work in question. The same could be suggested for this discourse, since William Shakespeare is very much dead. But, should he remain so? If certain members of the society wish to canonize the playwright, ergo, "keeping him alive," then shouldn't he be considered when discussing his works? For the purposes of this discourse, William Shakespeare will be very much alive, not in the physical sense of the word but in a figurative manner. The dramatist will need to be "present" when considering his intent, his motives, for depicting certain select members(groups) of people in a negative, racist, and some would suggest sexist, manner. This taking the playwright "to task" will not be for purposes of

defaming, discrediting, or in any way attacking his character (some would contend that he is too high on a pedestal to be touch by mortal hands). The purpose, or intent, here is to show that when a discourse is taken up on regards to William Shakespeare, one regarding his use of racist doctrine, that is to say racist propaganda, has to be entered into as well. Whether his use of racist writing was inadvertent or deliberate[4] will hopefully be drawn out in this discussion.

William Shakespeare set to paper several plays which depict certain classes of people, namely Jews and Blacks, with random abuses of women, in very negative, stereotypical fashion. In The Merchant of Venice, Shakespeare presents to us Shylock, the usurous, "fiendish Jew."[5] In Titus Andronicus we are given Aaron, the "black-hearted" Moor. And, finally, no discussion would be well rounded without some mention of Othello and Caliban in The Tempest. The primary discussion will rest on the depiction of Shylock, but the other characters are vitally important in that they lend validity to a discourse on racism.

Moody Prior, in an excellent article entitled, "Which Is the Jew that Shakespeare Drew? Shylock Among the Critics," provides us with a wealth of information regarding the play, the history of Jewish people in England at the time and the perceptions of Elizabethains towards the Jewish culture. It is here that we learn that there was an expulsion of Jewish people in 1290 by Edward I from England and that only Christian Jews could have been residents. Therefore, "usurers would of necessity have been Christians." This small community of Jewish people

were "barred from normal civic relationships and opportunities, and the epithet "Jew" was almost invariably pejorative."[6] This form of segregation, declassification, making into "otherness,"[7] had an impact on the lives of Elizabethans, gave them a certain kind of understanding, but, "to understand did not necessarily mean to forgive."[8] Shakespeare had this information readily available to him. He also had two other plays to pick and choose from(and it is my contention that this seriously limits his "creative genius") in Marlowe's The Jew of Malta, and Gerontus' Jew in The Three Ladies of London. Shakespeare's decision to cast Shylock as a Barabas-like Jew(from Marlowe's play), although not quite as deviant, places Shakespeare's motives or intentions clearly under a microscope for analyzing as well as in jeopardy. Despite the fact that he "would have known that most in his audience thought Jews cold-hearted usurers and crucifiers of Christ,"[9] Shakespeare could have realistically painted a different character than Barabas and Shylock. He chose not to. He chose to go for the "popular vote"(my quotations), the feeding of the multitudes. In short, he sold out and gave in to the masses, majority rule. He was presented with an opportunity "to work with or against" the negativity in England at the time and he opted for the fame.[10] This, however, would become the trademark of Shakespearean drama.

In "Shakespeare's jew: Preconception and performance," Marion Perret suggests that, "[He] may have functioned like a modern director in shaping the performance, which would thus give us a clue as to his auctorial intentions...we might know

more about [his] intent if we knew who played Shylock."[11] Before going on any further, some observations on the use of the term auctor(ial) are necessary. The concept of auctor, as developed by Donald Pease, "had formerly been supplanted when the Europeans in confronting humans they believed to be of a nature other than their own, recognized their own capacity to be other...the auctor based his authority on divine revelation, the author claimed authority for his words...and the genius identified the basis for his work with the laws of the Creator."[12] The term itself appears to have developed from separatism, segregation, "other nature," racism. Would Shakespeare's position be that of auctor, basing his authority on divine revelation; that of genius, his work being identified with the laws of the Creator; or that of author, who, "developed with the culture he helped to develop, [while] the genius claimed to be different from the rest of the culture?"[13] It would seem that these classifications could only relate to Shakespeare if he had developed his "craft"(my quotations) during the Middle Ages, since it is here that the terms are evolving and gaining a semblance of meaning. Moreover, Shakespeare, in his depictions of Shylock as "the dog Jew"[14] is helping to develop with the very culture, a racist, prejudicial, culture that he himself is developing with. Nor should we be so quick to brandish the playwright "genius" since the work is not creative, nor does it(the play) place him(Shakespeare) outside the society. As Perret points out:

> This inability to see Shylock simply as an individual causes a disquieting clash between our preconceptions about Shakespeare and our preconceptions about Jews. None of us[sic] likes to think that our [sic] Shakespeare, Shakespeare of the

> comprehensive humanity, could be prejudiced. Yet...an unflattering representation of this particular Jew [is] an unflattering representation of all Jews and mistreatment of the Jew by other characters [is] mistreatment by the playwright.
>
> (Perret. 265)

Shakespeare goes to great length to indicate that Shylock is to be considered "alien," an outcast, the other. In the court scene, it is Portia(another alien, outsider, other!) who says:

> The law hath yet another hold on you
> It is enacted in the laws of Venice,
> If it be proved against an alien
> That by direct or indirect attempts
> He seek the life of any citizen.
>
> (IV:i. 347-351)

Shylock is clearly not a member of this society, he is not a citizen, but an alien. The disparaging remarks that he is forced to be subjected to from practically every member of this society is nothing short of mistreatment. In Shakespearean Motives, Derek Cohen makes the observation that:

> The word Jew is used 58 times in The Merchant of Venice. Variants of the word like Jewess, Jews, Jew's, and Jewish are used 14 times; Hebrew is used twice. There are, then, 74 direct uses of Jew...in the play....Shakespeare understood the dramatic and rhetorical power of iteration[repitition], it must follow that there is a deliberate reason for the frequency of the word in the play.
>
> (Cohen. 106)

I would hasten to add that in the speech of Launcelot Gobbo(II:ii), the use of the word "Jew" appears five(5) times, "devil" rang in for three votes, and "fiend" got an overwhelming ten(10!) votes. This is nothing short of graffiti writing on a high

school urinal. Shakespeare has resorted to this form of writing "to use the cruel stereotypes of [an] ideology for mercenary and artistic purposes"(Cohen 118).

Shakespeare, to gain motivation for his play, as was referred to earlier, went to Marlowe and found The Jew of Malta, "a spectacle of personified evil at work, rather than a spectacle of tragic suffering."[15] The play, The Merchant of Venice, however, is supposed to be grouped with several other plays as a comedy. This poses a problem(several actually), in that, "unlike almost any other of Shakespeare's comic villains Shylock is never funny... that is [it] becomes a comedy for the simple but almost too convenient reason that it has a happy ending."[16] The similarities between the two plays are apparent. Barabas and Shylock are "villainous Jews." Both will have a daughter "converted" to Christianity. Both will lose their fortunes(Barabas to the Governor of Cyprus in the opening of the play; Shylock to his daughter, the Duke and Antonio). Barabas, for his "evilness" will be boiled alive. Shylock will be made to convert(like his daughter) to Christianity(Hie thee, gentle Jew./The Hebrew will turn Christian. I:iii. 178-179), which, in essence, is only a different form of murder(I will elaborate on this later in my discussion). The Marlowe play, as has been stated elsewhere, was not the only source for Shakespeare to turn to. Robert Wilson's The Three Ladies of London, Boccaccio's Decameron and Chaucer's "dramatic retelling of the story of Hugh of Lincoln through the dangerously sentimental medium of the Prioress are only the best known instances of voices contesting the characteristic prejudices of their times that may also have served

Shakespeare as examples."[17]

In "Prejudice and Literature," J. Mitchell Morse makes some shocking observations regarding some prominent writers (poets, dramatists, novelists) of our time. Morse is concerned with what he considers "vulgar"(he also labels this form of writing "cheap")expression in writing. He separates writers such as, Dickens, Pound, Eliot(T.S.), Shakespeare, Lamb, Joyce, and Larbaud, into what for him are "inadvertent" and "deliberate" offenders. The emphasis should not be lost here, that no matter what group these writers fit into, their writing can be misconstrued(I would rather choose to choose to say construed) as offensive and, as Morse would point out, "cheap." T.S. Eliot, who I never recall having read, in the article gets branded deliberate offender. Morse states:

> When a racist or an anti-Semite who is also a poet puts vulgar expressions of prejudice into his poems, with the evident expectation that they will move his readers as he himself is moved, he is in no position to ask that we ignore them when we judge his performance...nobody is a bigot for literary reasons; if he puts bigotry into his poems, he is writing not only as a poet but also as a bigot....
>
> (Morse 785)

The word dramatist could very easily be substituted for poet and would relate to this discourse on racism in the works of William Shakespeare. Morse does, in fact, single the dramatist out for writing an "anti-Semitic play...and for once[and more than once] to do something cheap."[18] The comments are doubly harmful since Shakespeare dabbled in both genres as poet and playwright. These comments on intent bring the discussion around

to those made in "The Intentional Fallacy," from Monroe Beardsley and William K. Wimsatt. It is their contention that:

> "Intention"...corresponds to what he intended ...intention is design or plan in the author's mind. Intention has obvious affinities for the author's attitude toward his work, the way he felt, what made him write.
>
> (Wimsatt & Beardsley. 4)

The writers are apt to point out as well that, "biographical evidence need not involve intentionalism, because while it may be evidence of what the author intended, it may also be evidence of the meaning of his words and the dramatic character of his utterance"(11). It is true that we do not have quantitative biographical evidence on Shakespeare's life, little appears to be known of the man[19] and so the facts about who he was are muddied. But, as Morse and others make clear, this does not justify his bashing of people because they are of a particular race, gender, or class.

We may not know much about Shakespeare the man, but when he gave life and voice to his characters he was saying something about "the way he felt"(Wimsatt & Beardsley). Bertrand Evans, in Shakespeare's Comedies, notes that, "A law of [his] comedies is that no permanent harm shall befall good persons; indeed, harm is not likely to come even to villains and wretches."[20] How, then, do we account for the downfall of Shylock? Is not what happens to him tragic? He is ridiculed by the populace, his daughter has robbed him and converted to Christianity, He will not get his bond nor any justice in Venice, and

for the final act of humility "he presently become[s] a Christian" (IV;i. 387). As a person of color reading this play one can not help but reflect on the very same "Christians" who slaughtered the Indian nations, enslaved African peoples, went to war among themselves(the Civil War) and are now engaged in a war(on holy ground!) against Iraq. Whatever his position, and I contend that he stands firm against the Jewish people, Shakespeare, "asserts emphatically that the world of The Merchant of Venice is one in which goodness and mirth prevail."[21] Shylock has been destroyed on all fronts. He will be attacked psychologically through racial epithets; his dignity will be crushed by the elopement of his daughter and her conversion over to Christianity; His wealth will be ripped from him by daughter, state and enemy (Antonio); and, finally, he will be made humble by a tearing away of his spiritual essence, from Jew to Christian, "I am content(IV;i. 393). This is racist doctrine(and propaganda) at work. Strip a man of his psychological being, his dignity, his wealth, force him to accept the prevailing laws and religion and what is left for him to do but either submit(become content) or die. When Ludwig Devrient played Shylock[22] on the German stage(prior to the rise of Hitler):

> Almost all spectators felt the defeat of [his] Shylock as a shattering experience. He gave an appalling cry as he realised that he had been outwitted and defeated by the Christians, and, by his broken gait as he left the stage, it was clear he was going to his death....
>
> (Williams. 138)

While Shakespeare overtly advocated racial prejudices, Devrient

accentuated rather than hid racial differences(William. 133 & 137).

Whether we are forced, by the playwright, to love or hate[23] Shylock, it is his creation, again by the playwright, which is cause for circumspect analysis. Shakespeare gave all of his characters life, a life through words and actions and, so, it is not on the characters that we should place any moral judgements but, rather, on the "bard" himself. As we shall see further, Shakespeare paints a very vivid picture of certain characters, namely, Aaron, Caliban, Othello, Shylock(just to name a few), and then expects to stand aside and allow us to rip at their throats because they are either a "dog Jew," "black fiend," or "an old black ram," when it is Shakespeare himself who is passing moral judgement, through racial bias, on these characters, these people.

II

**Sit downe and see what hainous stratagems**
**These damned wits contrive.**

--The Battell of Alcazar

Ruth Cowhig, in her treatment of "Blacks in English Renaissance drama..."[24] presents an historical perspective of how blacks have been cast in plays prior to and during Shakespeare's period. In Thomas Peele's play The Battle of Alcazar(c.1588), Peele introduces Muly Mahamet as 'the barbarous Moore...this

unbeleeving[has no god] Moore...cruel and treacherous, and his evil character is directly associated with his blackness...the central character is a black man, and his villainy has no redeeming qualities'(Cowhig. 2). Yet, again, we are faced with the question of where did Shakespeare go to get his information when he set down with pen to create Titus Andronicus and his depiction of Aaron, the black Moore. We know he went to Ovid's Metamorphoses to gain information on "The Story of Tereus, Procne and Philimela," which he makes use of in his play with a serious modifying of events. He also went to Seneca and found Thyestes. But, in these two plays there is no mention of any black person being an instigator in the deaths of these people, and Shakespeare needed an "evil" element for his play, again, to comfort his racist Elizabethan supporters. So, he went to Thomas Kyd's, The Spanish Tragedy and found his violent element. He may have decided to give this violent element color by looking at the character of Eleazor from the play The Spanish Moor's Tragedy. In this play, Eleazor "plots a series of violent crimes and has a bastard son after his lustful union with the Queen..." (Cowhig. 4). This is almost verbatim the plot line for Titus Andronicus. With the absence of Aaron from the play, the violence would still be compelling and grotesque. However, for dramatic purposes, Shakespeare, the omniscient author, is suggesting to his audience that none of this violence would have occurred if it had not been for this "black devil"(my quotations) Aaron. And the Elizabethans loved it. Aaron is an outsider, like Shylock, and it is the treatment of Aaron that makes the play unique, in that it provides insight into the nature of Shakespeare's

presentation of evil in general(Bryant. 30). Shakespeare, like the Elizabethan society in which he is living, had a limited understanding of black skinned peoples. There were dark skinned Negroes around him, being held as slaves, and based on what he heard and learned from his fellow countrymen(whites only since blacks and Jews are not citizens) he understood these people, different from himself, to be barbarians, sexually erotic and cruel Moors(Bryant. 30). Furthermore, with this "knowledge" (my quotations) in hand, what is the dramatist to do but paint Aaron as "black like the devil," lustful, cunning, and cruel (Bryant. 32). His reasons for doing this? As Douglas Green indicates, "With Shakespeare the motives for so doing are undoubtedly various: crime may not pay, but it does pay off."[25] Not for Aaron but for Shakespeare in a monetary sense. The majority of the violence in this play is white-on-white rape, mutilation, and murder. Aaron, except for assisting Titus in the removal of his hand, commits one murder, the death of the nurse, when it is suggested to him to kill his infant son that was begot with the Queen Tamora:

> The Empress sends it thee, thy stamp, thy seal,/And bids thee christen it with thy dagger's point.
>
> (IV;ii. 69-70)

To which Aaron's response is:

> 'Zounds, ye whore! Is black so base a hue?
>
> (IV;ii.71)

Once again, Shakespeare is making it clear that this character

is an outcast, the unassimilable element, racial as well as sexual otherness, and all that issues from such difference, crystallize in the sign of other life(Green. 326). Shakespeare's heavy reliance on Marlowe, Ovid, Kyd, and Seneca for this play places a lessening on his creative talent. By this I mean that there is very little, if anything, original in this play. The speech from Aaron about digging "up dead men from their graves,/ And set[ting] them upright at their dear friends' door"(V;i. 135-36), echoes of Marlowe's speech from Barabas in The Jew of Malta:

> As for myself, I walk abroad a' nights
> And kill sick people groaning under walls
> ...that I may, walking in my gallery,
> See 'em go pinion'd along by my door...
> Slew friend and enemy with my stratagems.
> Then after that was I an usurer.
>
> (II;iii. 175-191)

Barabas is proud to boast that in addition to all this, Sometimes I go about and poison wells(II;iii. 176).[26] Shylock's "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech is rooted in Senecan influence in that it is "the typically Senecan notion that the teacher of evil must expect his example to be imitated by his pupil" (Daalder 406). The speech is also powerful in that it is the voice of an oppressed member of a larger, yet still oppressed, group pleading his humanity. Shakespeare, however, is not moved to help the oppressed and this is brought out in the trial scene in which Shylock will be ridiculed, "Go one and call the Jew into the court(IV;i. 14), Thou shalt have nothing but the forfeiture,/To be taken at thy peril, Jew"(IV;i. 343-44), and subse-

quently dehumanized. Is he the out-and-our villain, or a persecuted minority...the aggressor or the sufferer, an anti-hero or someone of real quality who on some different, more humane stage might appear more impressive?[27] Shakespeare, I feel, has only one perspective which, again, is brought out in the play.

Furthermore, what would Shakespeare have us make of Aaron? Of the majority of characters presented to us in all the plays, he is also one of the most brutal(Hill p.9). As was already stated, there is no logical reason why he is in this play other than for the racist element, someone for Elizabethan audiences to hate. It took Ira Aldridge to rewrite the role, in an effort to give himself another black role to play, but also to give the character of Aaron noble sentiment. Errol Hill, in Shakespeare in Sable, writes:

> His Shylock was so sympathetically portrayed at a performance in Russia that the Jewish community thanked him for his interpretation of a character that Jews have usually condemned as inimical to their race....The blood-thirsty Aaron became a character of noble sentiment who was gentle and impassioned by turns [and] fierce with rage as he reflects upon the wrongs which have been done him....
>
> (Hill p.20)

Finally, Shakespeare, in referring to his black characters, never does give them any degree of dignity. And, in the one instance where the word negro is used, in The Merchant of Venice,

the dramatist is using the word as a synonym for "Moor." The Prince of Morocco, loved by the women of his country and an eligible suitor to the heiress Portia, explains his complexion as "the shadow'd livery of the burnish'd sun(II;i. 2), to which Portia mockingly comments(earlier), "If he have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil(I;ii. 140-1). The footnote for "complexion of a devil" read, the Devil was black. Even his most noble of Moors, Othello, has not escaped the racist propaganda, beginning with a dispute over the color of the man's skin and which raged for one hundred and fifty years(Hill. pp 8-9). The torture Othello receives at the hands, or more appropriately from the mouths of Iago et. al., drives the Moor to the murder of his wife, a white Venetian woman, and then to his own suicide. Martin Orkin, in "Othello and the "plain face" Of Racism," draws the distinction that, "both Iago and Roderigo use racist insinuation during their attempted putsch against Othello's position and reputation. Iago, as we know, calls up to Brabantio that, "an old black ram/Is tupping your white ewe"(I:i. 88-89).[28] There are enough other racial disparities drawn on throughout the play. The point here is that Shakespeare cannot find it in his plans to create a decent play with a strong black character in the lead role, a character who is given an opportunity to live the kind of life that most of the characters in The Merchant of Venice, especially those in Belmont will enjoy. Othello will fall prey to suicide, Aaron will be buried alive, "the infant[the child of Aaron] for whom the Moor gave himself up, cannot be contained[whether an absence or a silent presence] by Lucius' new order or by Shakespeare's play"(Green 326), the Prince of Morocco is doomed to a life

of celibacy(as is all suitors who choose incorrectly against the caskets), and Shylock's fate is emphatically sealed. The idea of other, otherness, and alien are very apparent in the casting of these characters. And, lastly, in his most confusing piece of casting, that of Caliban in The Tempest, Shakespeare, once again, expresses to his audience his position on equality and equalness. A few, brief, observations are important here.

In the introduction to the G.B. Harrison edition of Shakespeare: The Complete Works(1968), on The Tempest, Harrison notes that, "He[Caliban] is Shakespeare's portrait of the horrid savage ...[and that] Shakespeare seemed not to have shared the views of his contemporary Montaigne that savages are naturally gentle creatures..."(Harrison 1473). In the dramatis personae Caliban is characterized as "a savage and deformed slave." The birth of Caliban is from that of a relationship between a witch(his mother) and a devil(his father). There is no other way to view Caliban other than that of being black, if not "Coal-Black"(to borrow Aaron's phrase) then a lighter hue(say, "High-Yellow). In Errol Hill's article, however, he writes that "Caliban is the first nonblack role offered to black actors"(Hill 2, my italics).* If we follow Shakespeare's reasoning and the Elizabethans' limited knowledge of people different from themselves, and we know that they considered the Devil as being black, then it follows that Caliban should be a black character. With this in mind, then the following analogies, made by Hill, become appropriate:

*I am referring here to Hill's article on The Tempest, not the book.

> He[Caliban] tries to rape the young woman and plots to kill her father. As a result he is kept in a dungeon and routinely tortured. Ariel, on the other hand, a demon spirit of the air, pretty and delicate, is compliant to his master's orders and in return is promised freedom. To pursue the analogy further, one might say that Ariel is the house slave and Caliban the field slave.
>
> (Hill. 2)

In an accompanying photo to the article it shows that Caliban is played by a black actor, Canada Lee, Prospero is played by Arnold Moss, and Ariel is being played by a ballerina, Vera Zorina. This particular version of the play was being performed in the early 1940's. Hill writes further:

> Ariel, the creature of air and native to the Carribbean, is white. Caliban, the savage monster and wouldbe rapist from the Mediterranean, is black. It is beauty and the beast all over again, with white equating beauty and black bestiality.
>
> (Hill. 4)

And, finally, in a 1979 production directed by Gerald Freedman and with Joe Morton on stage as Caliban(Morton was the only black actor on stage), Hill makes the observation that Freedman appeared to be turning the clock back on racial, or interracial casting when:

> In the not-too-subtle curtain call, Ariel was held aloft on the upper stage by his spirits, while Caliban descended into the orchestra pit. The symbolism was obvious: heaven for whites, hell for blacks.
>
> (Hill. 8.)

The Tempest is another of Shakespeare's supposed comedies, but perhaps only for the reasons that Cohen pointed out earlier, that the play has a "happy" ending. Because of the racial tensions ripping this country apart, the productions that Hill makes note of in his article had to walk on egg shells at times in order to take focus away from the black/white focus of the play, and that has to do something to the "comedic" aspect of this kind of play. No doubt, as Maria Verch exclaims in "The Merchant of Venice on the German Stage since 1945." the play, "In Nazi Germany...was made to serve anti-semitic propaganda."[29] Performances of MoV have been racked with problems ever since due to the sensitivity of its subject matter. So much so that, "no new spectacular renderings have appeared so far"(Verch. 90).

Did Shakespeare, the author as producer,[30] take into consideration the impact of his writing, and more specifically his racist writing, would have, not only on his audience but the ramifications for the larger society? Think for a moment about slavery, the Holocaust, race riots, and then ask yourself whether, he, Shakespeare as poet and dramatist, "has the freedom to write whatever he pleases?"(Benjamin. 220). My argument would be that, no, he does not(no writer does) have this autonomy, and the explanation is presented by Benjamin, in that, "the present social situation compels him to decide in whose service he is to place his activity[his writing]"(Benjaman. 220). Benjamin further asserts that a demand be placed on the writer, a demand to think, to reflect on his position in the process of production (236). Shakespeare failed, at the moment of composing, to draw into consideration his obligation to future writers, both his

contemporaries and current poets and playwrights. His writing has done little to strengthen the ties between peoples(cultures, sub-groups, etc.), humanity. His writing has, moreover, placed his ethics in question, or better, still, jeopardy. In Protocols of Reading, Robert Scholes places an argument for "ethics" in that there are(must be) certain functions, effects, and ends of writing and reading(Scholes. 90, my italics). It would seem, to Scholes and perhaps others, that ethics plays a duel role in the writing and the reading of a text, say Shakespeare's plays for example, and that "morality" is never, nor should it be, lost in either process(whether writing or reading). Still, some would hold the argument that Shakespeare was writing about his society, questioning their ethics and morals and not necessarily showing his own prejudice(s), and God forebid that he should have any. My position is that he did, very realistically(as we all do) have prejudices and that he used the avenue of writing(as opposed to an avenue of sculpture, music, dance, etc.) to express those prejudices. Shakespeare was not(keeping in mind that this is still only speculation) writing to say that "this is the way my society, the people in it, feel about the Jews and the Blacks," but rather, however subtle, that this is how I, Shakespeare feel about these groups of people, people who I don't have much contact with(none of my best friends are Jews or Blacks), people who I haven't taken an opportunity to know and understand, just people who are talked about(stereotyped), ridiculed, and held in bondage, and this is not so much how my society feels, but, also, how I feel, and it will become your responsibility, the role of the critics, to prove otherwise.

In this instance, Shakespeare has made a mockery of ethics through his depiction of a "world[s] where people are assumed to be totally without freedom[Aaron, Othello, Shylock, Caliban] and reasonableness[Aaron, Shylock, Othello], where <u>they</u> never get to choose and can never get things right but must suffer for their inevitable errors[Shylock and Othello]"(Scholes.252, my italics). Because of his failure to understand the significance of his craft, the product, for the oppressed few, and for as Charles Altieri would phrase, "the more enduring cultural values,"[31] is limited(weakened) in its construction.

## III

**Who punishes**
**A crime with crime?**

Thyestes

It has been noted that a recurring trademark of Shakespeare has been his reliance on <u>other</u> sources for his plays(thus adding to the limiting of its construction) so it is a wonder whether he observed the above quote and more importantly a remark from the Attendant in the same play, that, "evil deeds return/Full oft upon their author"(II;i. 313-314), even if that author is now long since dead. I am aware, also, that the word "author" itself was evolving in its connotations/denotations. However, Shakespeare's understanding of the word came after Seneca's

and so the word would have had a different,more literary, meaning for the Elizabethan playwright.

Paul Renza, in his article entitled, "Influence," comments on the role of the ephebe poet and the function of the precursor's text(s). It would appear from reading this article that the ephebe poet depended on the precursory text but was constantly in a "civil war" to modify, restructure, give a new meaning to the precursors text. And, he could do this at will(freely), since it is not until the eighteenth century that he, the ephebe poet, first begins to suffer from "the burden of the past..." (Renza. 187). For Shakespeare this is very apparent, this dependence on prior text, the work of his precursors. And, moreover, what he has done in the majority of his plays, where he makes use of his "talent" as a poet, is to restructure events or text, "imitating not reality but Shakespeare's wish to depict reality on his own terms..."(Renza. 193). This, in turn, leads to what Avraham Oz refers to as "bad Shakespeare" simply because Shylock[as only one example] is regarded as implicating an entire race or nation...."[32] This preoccupation with Marlowe's play, the prejudice of the Elizabethan society, as well as those discriminating notions of his own(racist mentality) has led to a weakly conceived play, one that "does not stand out significantly among the mature comedies"(Charney. 134, my italics).

Furthermore, Lynda Boose makes the observation that, "the most important source for Shakespeare's plays is Shakespeare himself'(243). This has been the contention behind this discourse as well. The focus of any discourse has to rest on the

creator of the literary work and not on the character(s) in the work(s). This is the position, moreover, of the New Critics, whereas, the "Old" critics were concerned with the text and its merit. The text, however, is a small fraction of the larger scope which has to be its creator; his(or her) thoughts regarding the subject matter, which, in essence, include feelings, attitudes, perceptions, and so on. Moreover, if the creator(writer) is striving for mimesis, then, again, he/she has to consider the precursory text and its creator. For example, we know that Shakespeare went to The Jew of Malta to create The Merchant of Venice. Shakespeare should have thought on Marlowe's intent for writing this anti-semitic play. And, since he, Shakespeare, did read the play(or saw it performed, or just had information on it), and knew that its success was due primarily to the prevailing prejudice at the time, his decision to write a similar play is nothing short of making money off of racism. He wrote a racist play and got paid for it. Boose suggests that, "Much as we would like to, we will probable never know precisely what circumstances may have prompted [him] to write this play..."(250). But, the writing is on the wall. Boose somehow contradicts herself a few lines later when she notes that "a dramatist working within a form that implicitly demands gratification of his audience's privileges and prejudice..."(250). Along with my explanation, Philip Brockbank offers the following observation, that, "Shakespeare has a commanding but deceptive simplicity...."[33] In short, Shakespeare knew what he was plotting when he created Shylock, Aaron, Othello, Caliban, and the Prince of Morocco. Shylock's 'Hath not a Jew eyes?' speech, moreover, is "not a plea for sympathy or social justice, or for an end to racial

discrimination. It says in brief that a Jew, being like other human beings in physical and psychological properties, is like others, including Christians, in wanting revenge for great wrongs... it demands that his conduct be viewed in universal human terms, not on grounds which isolate him from understanding on the assumption that he is a monster"(Prior. 494-5). And, Shakespeare is being hypocritical by giving this speech to Shylock since he(Shakespeare) does nothing to rectify the wrongs committed against Shylock. The message at the conclusion of Act IV is one that suggests that "these people" <u>are</u>, in fact, "monsters" and, ergo, justice will <u>not</u> be served. Even <u>if</u> he did not share his audience's vulgar delusion, in catering to it he wrote vulgar plays(Morse. 806). In 1911, for example, E.E. Stoll observed that "the Elizabethan Shylock was not acceptable in the modern theatre, and that on the popular stage Shylock must be played pretty much as Irving played him, even though this is not Shakespeare's Shylock at all"(Prior. 480).

Shakespeare did, in fact, have a certain concept in mind in portraying Shylock as a villainous, "dog Jew," or in casting Aaron in a play that would be unaffected by his absence," or, finally, in casting Othello as a noble citizen only to have him digress to those "barbaric practices" understood by Elizabethans. As Lawrence Lerner(being quoted in Martin Orkin's article) states, "I am afraid Shakespeare suffered from colour prejudice..."(Orkin. 184). To play these roles in any enlightened manner retracts from the original conception. The only solution may be to do away with them entirely. Shakespeare acted criminally when he favored writing for a prejudicial(a crime in and

of itself) audience, despite, 'hath ever but slenderly [he might have] known himself'(Brockbank. 20). Walter Poznar provides a final remark:

> What Shakespeare's conscious motive may have been we will never know, but there is little doubt that the stereotype he began with has grown beyond its conventional form, has found a richer voice than that of Barabas, has touched a deeper dramatic chord than any Shakespeare might have anticipated when he first ushered Shylock[et. al.] onto the stage.
>
> (Poznar. 311)

**A Conclusion**

The human condition, the mind as well as the body, is a very special and fragile construction. It is this unique structuring which gives us superiority over the animals, but, not necessarily over each other. There are many <u>types</u> of animals, each vying for control of the top spot in that particular kingdom. However, there is only one <u>species</u> known as man, or mankind. Man has been endowed with the greatest of two gifts, the ability to think/reason and the power of voice, the utterance. Man, in most instances, can communicate with his fellow man by either <u>voicing</u> what he is <u>thinking</u> or <u>writing</u> down that which he is thinking. In either case, man has an obligation to his fellow man to think/reason carefully before he utters his hidden thought(s). He must, moreover, think carefully before committing his ideas to paper. He has at his disposal

the capability of bringing injury to a person or to a group of people through what he utters or from what he writes. If he uses these two primary modes of communication, not to ignore sign-language or morse code for example, for ill use(I'm thinking here of Nazi propaganda, graffiti, the writing of Shakespeare, T.S. Eliot, Pound, and others) then he commits a grave injustice. To take a phrase from Michel Foucault, "Writing is...linked to sacrifice and to the sacrifice of life itself."[34] There is a tremendous sacrifice made during the art of writing. Words, whether spoken or written, are powerful in their expression. Sadly, somewhere in his groping for material to construct his plays, Shakespeare failed to comprehend, and maybe he did and ignored the voices in his head, the power he would one day wield with his pen.

**Notes**

[1]I am using the Harrison, G.B. , ed. Shakespeare: The Complete Works. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968., edition for this and all subsequent quotations.

[2]Bové, "Discourse" pp. 54 & 63.

[3]Ibid. p62.

[4]From "Prejudice and Literature," by J. Mitchell Morse. I happened upon this article while researching for another course. The article was very enlightening in regards to writers that I have and have not read, who portray what Morse considers "vulgar" writing. Shakespeare got a "deliberate" ranking.

[5]This is from Launcelot Gobbo's speech(II;ii2-32) an appalling speech to read and then to watch in the BBC performance on reserve in the library.

[6]See the Prior article, pages 82-85.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid, 86.

[9]From the Popkin article, "A Jewish Merchant of Venice."

[10]See the Marion D. Perret article.

[11]Ibid, 263.

[12]From the Donald Pease article. I jump around within this article to make my point.

[13]Ibid, 109.

[14]See the Joan Holmer article. Just about every article relating to this play emphasized Shylock's being the "dog Jew."

[15]Cole, 123.

[16]See "The Rage of Shylock," by D.M. Cohen(Derek Cohen), p. 193. He also has a chapter in Shakespearean Motives which I refer to later.

[17]See the Thomas Cartelli article, p. 259.

[18]Morse, p. 803.

[19]We can gain an understanding of Shakespeare's England from Richard Popkin in "A Jewish Merchant of Venice," and the history behind Dr. Roderigo Lopez, physician to Queen Elizabeth and an actual merchant named Alonso Nunez de Herrera (Abraham Cohen de Herrera) who Shakespeare may have based his play on. Additional information pertaining to Shakespeare/Marlowe stems from Doris Wilbert's article "The Authorship Controversy & Christopher Marlowe," an interesting read. Ruth Cowhig and Errol Hill could only give a history of blacks in England during Shakespeare's writing and the prejudice that was rampant in England at the time. All writers could only make guesses and assumptions on Shakespeare the man.

[20]Evans, p.60.

[21]Ibid, p. 66.

[22]See the Williams book, pages 129-146, but particularly pages 132-145 for his discussion on Shylock. Several actors played the role since it was first played on the German stage in 1777, the actors being German. Polish born Jew Bohumil Dawison is the first Jew on the German stage to play the role of Shylock, between 1850 & 1860. For additional information on performances of The Merchant of Venice on the German stage since 1945, Maria Verch's article is very good.

[23]Ibid, p. 216.

[24]The Cowhig piece is a chapter from David Dabydeen's book and I refer to this article and his book. The quote that opens part two is from Cole's book on Marlowe and can be found on page 122, spelled as I printed it.

[25]See the Green article, p. 317.

[26]I am using a 1964 edition by Richard W. Van Fossen and all quotes from the play are from this edition. This quote is on page 47. Aaron's speech is often compared to this speech from Barabas. Shylock is truly very "mild" in comparison to Barabas, Marlowe's creation it is important to keep in mind.

[27]See the Homan article, p. 66.

[28]The article takes into consideration the play being performed in White-ruled(apartheid) South Africa. The quote is

on page 168, The article does end by suggesting that the play does continue to fight racism, although not in South Africa, per se, since, "The South African educative authorities clearly sense something in the play itself sufficiently inimical to racist ideology and practice to discourage its use in high schools" (184).

[29]Verch, p. 84-85.

[30]This is the Walter Benjamin article, "The Author as Producer."

[31]Since I am grappling(along with several other students) with "aesthetics" in literature, I was somewhat amazed to stumble across these comments offered by Charles Altieri. His article, "Literary Procedures and the Question of Indeterminacy," was a tough chew(and swallow!), but, he writes, "A general case for determinacy, moreover, must show that in most cases we either have a basic sense of informing purpose or we know the kind of evidence(which may not be easy to get or to prove) which would resolve competing interpretations." I find this, somehow, appropriate in a discourse on Shakespeare. The evidence is very limited and sketchy and therefore affects any real interpretation of his work, making all interpretations somewhat valid. The quote is on page 128 of Charney's book, "Bad Shakespeare."

[32]Ibid., 134.

[33]From the Brockbank article, "...Parables for the City," p.7. This, like the Cowhig piece, is actually a chapter from Brockbank's book On Shakespeare.

[34]Foucault, p. 117.

Note: The quote from Thyestes is taken from the Duckworth edition, 1942.

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